

The America Justin Webb Grew To Love

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/10/21/the-america-justin-webb-grew-to-love/

2009-10-21

America is, in part, a Third World country that has not got over the deep stain of slavery – but it is also the most exciting and innovative society in the world. That was the realistic but approving verdict of BBC North America Editor Justin Webb in a [Polis talk](#), as he reflected on his experiences covering key events in recent American politics, from 9/11 to the election of its first African-American leader.

This report by Jasmine Chan.

Webb was broadly affectionate and positive about America, even during the Bush years when many outside the States saw it as a dangerous and misguided country. But despite general optimism about the new administration he was careful to point out, as he spoke with BBC Radio 4's Kirsty Young to a large crowd at the London School of Economics, that the election of Barack Obama has not ended issues of racial inequality in America. "He took a decision not to be a 'black president' very early on," said Webb, adding that the President's reluctance to appear assertive or aggressive about his racial background in any way may have played a crucial part to his success.

Webb further attributed the stubborn nature of race issues in the United States as something to do with the substantial "stain of slavery" on the country's history, a fact which still sits uncomfortably on the American psyche. "The extent to which Americans believe they are over race is way, way exaggerated in most white, suburban American minds" when in fact it still serves as a driving force behind much of American racial conflict.

Recounting his eight years spent as a journalist and broadcaster across the Atlantic, Webb described the immense geographic and economic diversity of the United States, stating that he believed poverty and the "almost Third-World conditions" of certain parts of America actually serves as a catalyst and motivating force for many working-class citizens.

According to Webb, "There is a kind of national myth that Americans feel they need to buy into," which perpetuates a sense of potential success that is available to all Americans, despite changing levels of social mobility.

The discussion about political elections led to musings about the growing power of home video activists and the 'Flip' video generation, where it seems that everyone has a video device in their pocket, ready to record and broadcast any piece of incriminating behavior.

Webb commented on the increasing difficulty of policing politicians and those in office, citing the example of former United States Virginia Senator George Allen who was famously recorded using the racial slur 'macaca' during the 2006 Senate elections, which consequently cost him his Senate seat. Webb predicted that video, rather than bloggers, would have a similarly important impact at the next UK General Election.

The issue of American health care, a topic frequently debated during the presidential elections and still today a highly contested issue within the United States Senate, was then raised in relation to the typical European mindset which regards a 'socialist' health care system is not only necessary but as a more civilized and 'intellectual' option.

Webb pointed out that a universal health care system is not automatically seen as a positive aspect of government by many in the United States, with particular emphasis on young, fit Americans who don't see health coverage as a necessary expense. An inherent distrust of 'big government' still exists amidst large swathes of the American population, a point Webb punctuated with an example of two cancer patients he had interviewed who stated that they "still wouldn't want the government to get involved" despite mounting hospital bills.

Despite their fear of dominating government power, Webb remained positive about American patriotism and an allegiance to the American system as a whole. "They have an enormous respect for the flag, for the organs of the constitution, and for the presidency." It is this sense of respect, according to Webb, that fosters a need to protect the symbolic 'America' from being used improperly not only in political wars for election but as a justification for unpopular foreign policy decisions.

The lecture finished with questions open to the floor, addressing other crucial issues such as the American dedication to free speech on its airwaves. "There is a real cacophony in the American media marketplace," Webb stated, which is often created by conservative broadcasters like Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage.

This tendency can, according to Webb, create a situation where American broadcasters on the left of the political spectrum feel crowded out of the field, and also where more rational and objective commentary can be left out. Given the current controversy within British political broadcasting about the right to political representation and the need for objectivity, free speech was a timely issue to conclude an evening of insight and discussion.

This report by Jasmine Chan.

Have a Nice Day: A Journey Through Obama's America by Justin Webb is available now in hardcopy or paperback.

